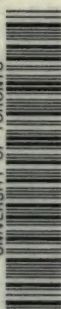


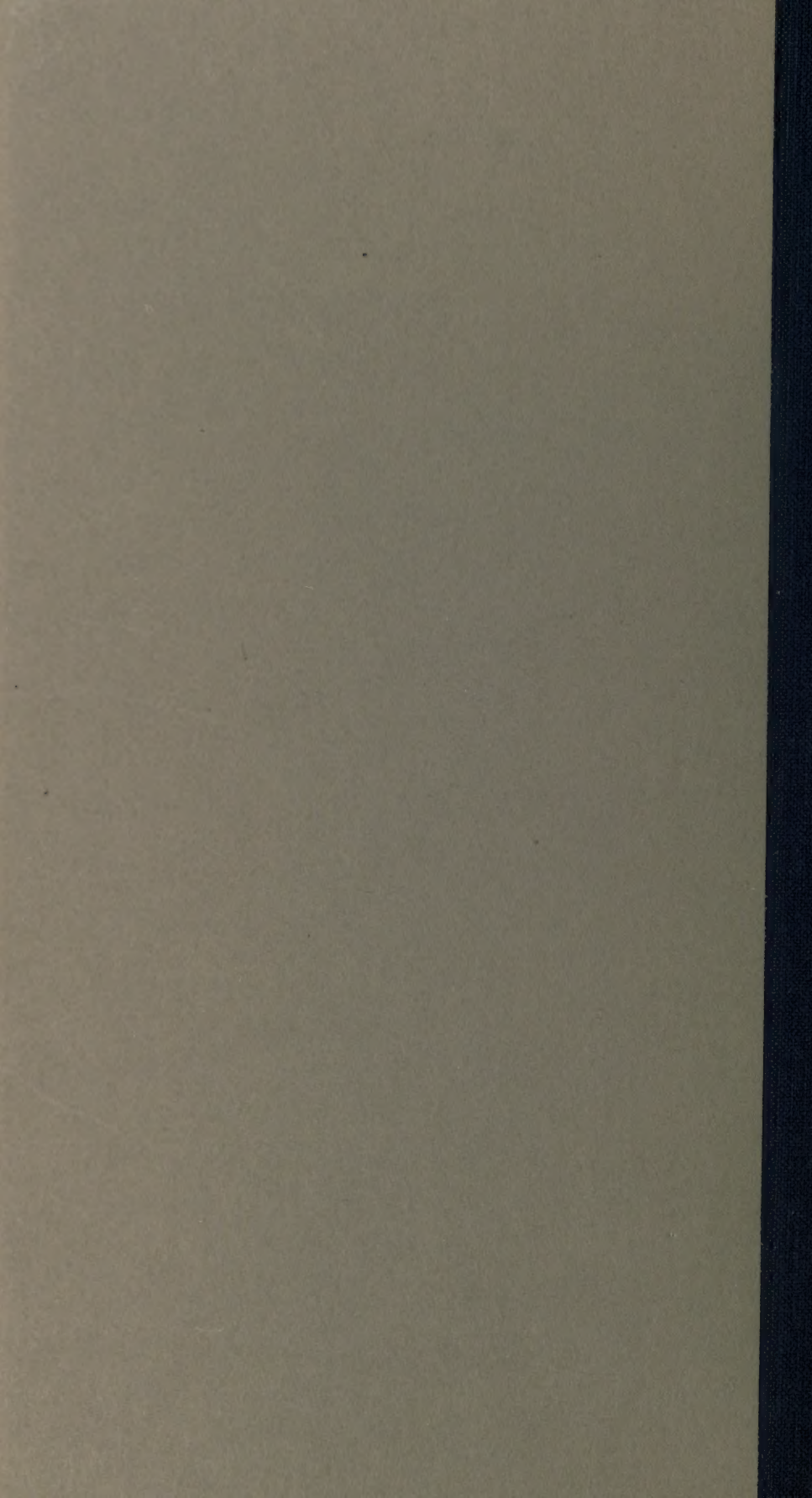
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# THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 42

## Some Remarks on Translation and Translators

By

*John Swinerton*  
J. S. Phillimore



January, 1919



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## SOME REMARKS ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATORS

[This paper, originally written for the Glasgow Branch of the English Association, has been recast; but the author still feels it necessary to ask indulgence for the casual and unstitched form of it. This is not fit prose for publication; and yet such papers do not fail of their purpose, although more hares be started than caught. We were hunting for exercise. If anything can be gained for the pot, so much the better; but the run was the thing.—*Dec. 1918.*]

### I

ILLITERATE men have been known to say, as an argument in their attack on classical studies, that all the Classics have been translated, and therefore there is no need to continue reading the originals. Sometimes they have the grace and intelligence to add a reservation, 'Except the poets'. So they do perceive a difference between the cases of Homer and Euclid. Euclid may be said to lose nothing in being decanted into another language; Aristotle (as we have him) very little; but ascend the scale to Plato, and—what a difference! How falsified is Plato in Jowett's much-belauded version! How inadequate was Jowett to apprehend, much more to reproduce, even with Swinburne's prompting, the finesse, the slyness, the deftness of his author! But when you come to poetry, why is it any more reasonable to say that the translation supersedes the original, than to say that an engraving or a copy supersedes the original picture?

Since material progress exists and the capital of science rolls forward accumulating, much of the contents of ordinary prose may be passed on and the former vehicle become obsolete. Let us freely concede that, if some new Caliph were to collect and destroy the last copies of Euclid's Greek, civilization would not be substantially the poorer. But in Art progress either does not exist, or at least exists only in discontinuous series: poetry is much more wholly a work of art than healthy prose is; and my concern will be more largely with poetry. It was Samuel Johnson who said that the poets are the best preservers of a language, because people must go to the original to relish them (April 11, 1776, quoted by Fitzgerald, ii. 61).



## II

Just as it takes two to speak the truth, one to hear straight as well as one to speak straight, a frank correspondence between question and answer—so, I take it, perfect translation requires a sort of mutual action set up in both languages, both that from which and that into which it is to be performed. Exchange on the level must be possible if there is to be quite honest dealing. And that is to say each party must not only come furnished with an equal sum but equal resource in small change.

Or, to drop metaphor, the two languages must be equivalent in point of *expressiveness*. Excuse me if I somewhat labour this matter. The foible of criticism is that so much of it may be resolved into fancy. It lacks what the Anglo-German jargon calls 'Objectivity'. But by taking *expressiveness* we have quite a positive and real standard of comparison between any two languages as well as a measure of development within any one language, from time to time. Expressiveness no more needs (or, for that matter, comports) definition than health or maturity of body. Its absence is remarked; when present, it is taken for granted. To block out the notion roughly, let us say that it implies both a competent wealth of vocabulary, and that wealth economized by good taste, i.e. sense: new words brought in only to mean new things or new ideas.<sup>1</sup>

If Brunetière taught us that the life of a language is pretty accurately measurable in the forms it invents, modifies, and finally exhausts and discards, he gave us also a real criterion for establishing relations between one literature and another. Mastery of any given form, or mastery in general, is a quite real and solid thing; and the classical standard, in the true sense of the word, is irreducible: the full expressive power, comporting finesse no less than force, subtlety in distinction no less than grandeur in comprehension; to record, with economy of means, fundamental truth and general experience. When a language attains to this it is mature. The summit is reached. The solstice has begun. And though that saying of Velleius is terribly true of the single forms, *Brevis in perfecto mora*, yet by the law of the development of kinds,

<sup>1</sup> Stupid neologisms such as *Foreword* for *Preface*, which some Germanizing fool found himself saying, and then a hundred light-hearted parrots repeated it—all round the Press—add nothing to the power or beauty of a language. *Preface* is neither obsolete nor inexact. Such a neologism is merely wanton, prompted by weariness of well-doing. Whereas the split infinitive (much as we may dislike it) may be defended as a new instrument of exact expression.



a richness and flexibility of adjustment may allow the language as a whole—witness Greek, *par excellence*—to persist many centuries in full daylight. Probably as a rule maturity lasts longer in prose than in poetry. For prose is an institution. Latin poetry, for instance, is at full power from Virgil to Lucan; Lucan is an inventor, enriching his verse out of the losses of prose oratory. But after Lucan nothing of prime greatness is produced in poetry until Prudentius—whose case would take us altogether too long to analyse; but, at any rate, he represents not continuity but a violent adaptation of literary forces into a new form. In Latin prose, on the other hand, it is simply true to say that Jerome and Augustine could drive their ship under all the sail that ever Cicero carried. To call them a decadence is a foolish prejudice only possible to those who never read them. The inspiration is new, but no new expressive power is needed. They inherited that. Expressiveness in prose was maintained for nearly five centuries by the Latins: from Cicero to Augustine is a table-land on the high level.

It is interesting to observe the arrival of the moment in various literatures. One might have expected Latin to reach maturity of expressiveness earlier than it did. Neither oligarchy nor demagoguery is unfavourable to the florison of language, and of these two elements was Roman polity tempered. It is surprising when you recollect that more than a century passed between Terence's death and Cicero's. Terence was already so accomplished. The hall-mark of maturity—a close approach between prose and verse, when educated people talk well and write easily, writers use no pretension or solemnity because readers meet them half-way, with unobsequious intelligence: literature need be no more than recorded talk, because talk is not slovenly and inarticulate—is stamped on Terence as it is on Swift. So it was said of Vanbrugh by his biographer that 'his most entertaining scenes seem to be no more than his common conversation committed to paper'. Why then was Latin at a standstill for all that time? I believe the answer is: Civil War. Just when the moment was come for a step upstairs, in the decade of the Gracchi, began that horrible era of faction which devastated Rome and Italy for more than forty years. The Muses were silenced before they had finished their education—of which Translation is the great means. Massacre and proscription destroy Literature as effectively as the crushing engine of State Socialism. Rome after the Antonines exemplifies this latter. The former is exemplified in the literary stagnation of Rome during the period 130-80 B.C. But we need not look so far afield. We can see it exemplified at home. The influence of the Humanist Renaissance, where it ran a normal course, worked on the European vernaculars



through translations. You may say all the Classics were translated into Italian before 1500; and consequently Italian is fully matured in faculty and resource at the close of the *Quattrocento*. In England and France the Reformation broke in with disastrous effect: France has not attained maturity in prose until about 1570, England hardly before the advent of Dryden. Yet if things had followed their natural course, and the translators had been there to take up their allotted part in the development, English prose would not have marked time as it does from More till Bacon. The celebrated Tudor translations were long overdue. That stage should have been past by 1550, but it was suppressed in the general destruction of learning by Henry VIII and his hopeful son.

So far as a foreigner can judge, French and Italian seem to be adequate in expressiveness to Greek at its best, as fine-spun as Plato's thread, as rich in vocabulary, as sharp in precision and distinction; natural and unconstrained in the temperamental or gesticulatory part of language, as the equipment of particles and the disciplined economies of syntax make Attic Greek of the fourth century B.C. I do not think one could roundly deny a claim that modern English is the equal of Attic Greek in potential expressiveness; and yet—an adequate Plato remains to be done. When you read some one who writes good modern English, do not you say, 'This is the kind of man who ought to translate Plato'? But, alas, one has to admit some impediment every time. Matthew Arnold was a prig; Shaw and Wells are buffoons, and know no Greek; Pater knew too much Greek, and perhaps wrote English too much like a foreign language. The requirements have never yet been found co-existing. Mr. Compton Mackenzie is my present favourite for the appointment.

Language, then, is measurable and comparable in terms of expressiveness. Now if two languages are *unequal* in expressiveness, several consequences may be expected. The translator, complaining as Lucretius complained, of the *patrii sermonis egestas*, 'the beggary of our national language,' enriches and improves it by this discipline of translation. Needs must when the devil drives. Such and such a term, or a phrase, has perfect neatness and unambiguity in Greek: where can I find it in English, or how can I get it made? The slowness of invention is stimulated. The junior tongue, confronted with the problem, or piqued by the challenge, of keeping pace with its elders and betters, must develop missing organs, borrow for its deficiencies, strain itself to unsuspected capacities and attainments. 'To change is to live, and to be perfect is to have changed often.' We change in response to a challenge. One might add: to improvise



is to live at a very high rate of existence. To improvise without blundering is the great test of Quintilian's *firma facilitas*, the mark of mastery. By translation a language both learns what it is lacking in—the beginnings of change are in the imagination: till it be awakened, a language like a mind may remain sunk in self-unconsciousness and quiet hereditary fatuity; and again, by translation it learns how to make good. Since Latin improved itself, patiently and humbly, up to the model of Greek, by translations, the Greek map of life has been preserved in tradition; and, even where it had got blurred in detail, nevertheless this charter of civilization was easily recoverable at the Renaissance. And when next a shrinkage of human intellect takes place (as seems very probable before long) the Greek model is still there to limit and correct the shrinkage. Only a self-enclosed language is damned to decline. Translation is the very symbol of human tradition and continuity. The great translators are 'pivotal' people in the history of literature.

Sometimes it is a rich personality like Ennius, who knew that possessing three languages his mind was triply engined; sometimes a great artist with just the impelling touch of mania added to raise the doggedness of ambition to the point of fury. You will recognize Lucretius: *docti furor arduus Lucreti*. One pictures him as a man digging, hewing, blasting through rugged natural obstacles, an inlet for the irrigating stream to be derived from an abundant reservoir that he has struck in the next valley. Greater than these is Cicero: perhaps the man who of all others has served in opening the main channel by which past and present communicate and European civilization maintains identity in development.

Cicero taught Philosophy to speak Latin; and through Latin she learned to express herself in the modern languages. He was moved by no fanatical enthusiasm for a creed; nor even by the venturesome curiosity of a facile artist trying his hand in a new medium. His philosophical works were the pastimes and distractions of an enforced abstention from politics. His industry and energy must find employment; he must speak or burst. And so he spoke, to no small purpose; for it is largely owing to him that our minds are articulate.

So much then for the regular case of translation serving as a food and discipline for the development of a young language. There would be materials for another chapter in studying the profitable effects on the translator himself. To instance Dryden: one might suppose that his exercises in translation helped him to the easy abundance and simplicity which are at his command both in prose and verse. I cannot imagine any one who has made a translation of any pretty large amount

of a foreign author and not had for a reward of his labours at any rate an improved fluency of his pen.

### III

And now that we have considered the normal phenomenon when a language of inferior power and accomplishment borrows by translation for its own improvement, shall we stop to inquire whether the opposite be also possible? At any rate few will be found to subscribe to Perrault's paradox that ancient authors can better be judged in translations than in the originals. And yet, like most paradoxes, it represents a minority truth which could hardly be safeguarded save under the form of paradox. Or shall we dismiss this as another unwritten chapter, with the heading *On Translators who have bettered their original*? I will only remark in passing that good scholars, Persian born, have declared that Fitzgerald is finer than Omar; whether thanks to old Fitz's talent or to the superiority of the instrument that was at his disposal. One has also heard it said that Gilbert Murray is better than Euripides; but this not so much by good judges of Greek as by inveterate Romanticists to whom both Rhetoric and Cynicism are unpermissible in verse, and who find just these disturbing Euripidean qualities painlessly eliminated in Murray.

We will pass to a much more interesting point: let it next be a question whether, as each modern language develops, it comes up, stage by stage—as the traveller arrives at one landmark after another on his road—with the ancient masterpieces;<sup>1</sup> and thus, each of them by the series of their development, from time to time, reaches the proper and perfect moment for translating each in turn of the law-giving monuments of Greece and Rome? I had formulated this question to myself, roughly, but with considerable zest in the prospect, for it lies in the domain of that great and, in the true sense, epoch-making piece of criticism, Brunetière's *Développement des Genres*, when I found, in an appendix to the Poet Laureate's volume,<sup>2</sup> a quotation from Prof. Egger (who taught him Greek at the Sorbonne fifty years ago) which expresses very clearly and well an affirmative solution of my query:

'Talent is not everything in successful translation: works of this kind usually have their appropriate season, which, once past, seldom returns. At a certain age in their respective development two

<sup>1</sup> Whose essence, and the very meaning of whose Classicism is that they abide as norms or standards—for what is classical but *quod ubique, quod semper*?

<sup>2</sup> *Ibant Obscuri*, p. 148.



languages (I mean those of civilized peoples) correspond by analogous characteristics; and this resemblance of idiom is the first condition of success in any attempt to translate a really original writer. Genius itself cannot make good the want of this. If this be so, we shall be asked at what epoch of its history (which already goes far back into the past) our (French) language was worthy to reproduce Homer. We answer without hesitation and without any affectation of paradox: *If the knowledge of Greek had been more extensive in the West during the Middle Age; and had there been found in France in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, a poet capable of understanding the ancient rhapsode's Songs and spirited enough to translate them; we should now be possessed of Iliad and Odyssey in a copy which would be the most agreeable to the genius of antiquity. The heroism of Chivalry, which resembles that of Homeric heroes in so many features, had then made a language after its own image, a language already rich, harmonious, eminently descriptive; only that it lacked the stamp of a bold and powerful imagination. The fact is easily seen nowadays, thanks to the numerous Chansons de Geste which are emerging from the dust of our libraries: the same tone of candour in Narrative, the same faith in an element of marvellous without artificiality, the same curiosity in picturesque detail; strange adventures, great feats of arms related at length; little or no serious tactics, but a great power of personal courage; a sort of brotherly affection for the warrior's comrade, his horse; a taste for fine accoutrement; the passion for conquest, the passion (a less noble one) for looting and pillage; a generous practice of hospitality; respect for women moderating the roughness of barbaric manners.*

*'Such was a state of manners, which may truly be called epic: nothing was to seek but a Homer's brush to paint the picture.'*

Thus Egger: his doctrine was approved and adopted by Littré, who put it to the test in an experiment on the first book of the *Iliad*, which seems to me highly successful. Dr. Bridges reserves his opinion. What do you say to the Eggerian doctrine? At any rate it opens pleasant vistas of speculation. Confining ourselves for the moment to Greek authors, has there existed a perfect natural moment when Homer, Pindar, Aeschylus, Thucydides, Plato, could each pass level through open doors into English and find an unembarrassed lodging in our literature? And when did the climacteric opportunity come to them respectively? We are playing with *ifs* and *ans*; for as in other human affairs, so here it seems to be a case of 'Never the time and the place and the loved one all together'. In the fifteenth century English (witness Malory) was adequate for Epic,—if not already in Chaucer's time; but after Chaucer no poet arose who was sufficient for such things. And nobody knew Greek until a later and a disparate phase of manners had succeeded. It may be set down to the backwardness in learning which the arrest of the Renaissance caused in

England, that out of that hotbed of poetical talent under Elizabeth and James there proceeded no great naturalization of the Attic tragedians in our language.<sup>1</sup> Milton could unquestionably have done it. And Greek Lyric? When was that due? Was the outburst of Romanticism the ideal moment when it should have been translated? Perhaps had Fate spared us more Sappho and less Pindar, Shelley might have had the mind, as he had the hand, to do it; and Byron might have helped with Alcaeus. Or was it those Caroline gallants who let the moment pass? Deal only with forms in the abstract and it is easy to rig up correspondences; but as soon as ever you begin to consider real works and real writers, instead of abstractions, the personal equation is seen to be of overwhelming importance. To the producing of the original classic itself, as Brunetière so well remarks, there go a peculiar happy alliance of conditions which are rarely united, and the personal begetting talent of the poet must supervene. Your altar and your fat burnt-offering will not avail unless the fire come down from heaven. And if, in order that the perfect translation may come about, genius must again be manifested, is it not like asking that a miracle be repeated in aftertime, with the addition of one uncommon factor into the bargain?—I mean learning, for without that the translator has no credentials to negotiate the foreign potentate's visit. In poetry especially the comet-like intrusions of personality so baffle calculation, that one is often likely to be left repeating the formula, 'If the man had been forthcoming, the time was ripe,' and leave it at that. But poets are a flying corps; prose-writers are infantry, or at least a *terra firma* force. In prose the 'stunting' genius is less indispensable. Writers of prose borrow more from the mind of their period than do poets. There is more chance for Egger here. For instance: surely we may say that our seventeenth century was the moment when Thucydides should have been made English once for all: the stiff gorgeousness of Milton's prose, and the narrative gait of Clarendon, somewhat encumbered and yet not incapable of a martial and dramatic agility, denote such a state of language as best would answer to the intricate eloquence of that first great pupil of the Rhetoric school. These were promising auguries, and it turns out in fact that Hobbes's version does not belie the conjecture. Bating his inaccuracy of detail (his Greek was not perfect, and the text was still in bad case) it is a masterpiece. Read him in the famous speeches (never, since first they were penned, have they been so full of actuality as during these last years), and Jowett seems a nerveless paraphrase. And Plato might have taken on a very graceful and well-fitting dress

<sup>1</sup> I find this idea in Fitzgerald.



in the English of Dryden's and Temple's period, when the written and the spoken word were in happy adjustment. This Plato exemplified; and deserved of us nothing less than this. *This* is the *ne plus ultra* of prose; but to talk well and yet not be stilted, to write with easy frankness and yet escape triviality, these are consummations which no one man may command. They happen in the halcyon days. They are bred out of a certain natural homogeneity—almost a covenant of culture and manners—which is perhaps only possible in a small society free from anarchic liberty of prophesying and from competitive wilfulness. For a time our language had this; but it failed in that time to give us our Plato truly Englished.

Therefore I doubt if, in ultimate residue, Egger's doctrine leaves us more than this: that there are moments when in power and aptitude two languages are most nearly matched for the production of a certain sort of literature—be it Epic poem or prose dialogue, or what you will.

#### IV

Those are the happiest ages when a man 'writes the language of his time', having no necessity or temptation to do otherwise. Under these conditions even second-rate talent has a career open to attain distinguished success. For frugality is so much a note of true classicism—and these conditions are those of classicism—that not merely the individual but also the community economizes. Its inheritance is improved. For the great men's use of language leaves it more efficacious for smaller men coming after them, to employ well: whereas your Dervish Contortionists, the Strong men or Supermen of literature—I will instance Carlyle—leave a trail of destruction behind them. Our language is an instrument which their wilfulness has abused and left less fit for the next workman. Their successors are sacrificed to their egotistical perversity. Every one will write better for taking a course of Swift, Hazlitt, or Newman, or other writers of 'central' prose; but a course of Carlyle will merely betray itself in certain nervous tricks and outlandish grimaces.

Thanks to this law then, any language at its classical period is more foolproof, and more able to comfort and supplement a modest talent, enabling it to render useful service; especially in translation. It was no singular genius which enabled Amyot by his versions to take so honourable a place in French literature. We must therefore revise what is sometimes too hastily asserted: when we ask for a translation of a masterpiece, we are not requiring a miraculous repetition of a genius which was itself unique. The highest creative power of

genius is not requisite ; if the time be of the right tenor and suggestion, and if the language fully contribute its part, then curiosity, ambition, personal fancy and partiality—modest everyday substitutes for genius, but not at all to be despised—may move a writer to produce what shall prove to be a true masterpiece in its kind.

It is not merely in homage to the great memory of Brunetière that I labour these points. His analyses go so deep ; and the biological analogy for literature (discreetly pursued, of course) gives a penetrating power to criticism, which is quite modern. Ancient critics could not fail to remark—Latins especially, with their perennial genius for self-depreciation—that though young they were already corrupt ; that language advanced from rudeness to civilization ; and they had left the rude stage only a little behind : witness both Cicero and Horace. Tacitus takes the point of view which regards Cicero and the Augustans as antiquated. But by the time when that development was really stationary or already turning to decline there were no critics to mark the transformation or to watch the rudimentary beginnings of quite new kinds. Criticism as we understand it now, criticism as a branch of history, is the nineteenth century's creation ; and chiefly Brunetière's.

But it is time to show how it bears upon the translator's task. In this way. A beginner in a language sees each separate work as a detached creature, much too near the eye ; without horizon, and in no relation to the rest of the literature, whether antecedent or contemporary. He repeats parrot homages to its greatness ; but if you ask him—say—with whom in English is Plato level ? Is it Bacon, or Browne, or Lamb ? 'What's your notion of Horace ? Is he like a Tom Moore, or an Austin Dobson, or a Thomas Campbell ? Could Marvell produce the most Horatian ode in English, or Tennyson ?'—he will either not apprehend the question or at any rate be in no position to answer it. And yet it is surely a great piece of presumption to set about bringing something out of Greek or Latin into our own language without realizing what it meant, how it stood, in the judgement of Greeks and Latins.

Now to estimate the pitch or key of any given style is the greatest of problems for translators. It is like discovering the family history and antecedents of a stranger ; nay more, trying to determine the expression of a face. It takes many years deep reading in the ancient languages to achieve this. It is a mystery entirely unknown as a rule to the editors of school texts. To give a crucial instance from my own experience, it was not by any aid from modern editors, our little Pages and Sidgicks, &c., nor even from Conington himself,



that after many years I came to perceive that when Horace attributed to Virgil the qualities

*molle atque facetum*

he meant something—something quite definite, and something quite inconsistent with the prevailing conception of Virgil in terms of the modern English Public Schoolboy. In Virgil you may learn to discern the humour and the irony (which are so easily lost in the more or less thick veil which separates us from any foreign language) by studying the old commentators, Servius & Co. Virgil the sentimental humorist! What a revelation, when you have read some hundreds of English schoolboy's essays on the fourth Book of the *Aeneid*—Was Aeneas a perfect Boy Scout? Did he say *Noblesse oblige* to himself three times a day? Did he always remember to be sorry for those who were not like himself? Alas, he did not; and he was horrid to Dido. He was no gentleman—what a revelation, to read that simple sentence in which Servius characterizes the book

*paene comicus est stilus.*

'Almost in the manner of comedy.' It is a touchstone thesis for an essay; one can hardly write upon it without betraying ignorance either of Virgil or of comedy. Such a sentence is a key. Until you have hit the pitch of an author, you risk an utter falsification in rendering him. You may be able to construe every sentence in him, and yet slander him in gross and your total result be a lie. What an actor calls 'conception of the part' is really much more important than knowing words correctly.

It may seem a difficult—certainly it is an expert's achievement to appraise the level of a classical author's writing. Above all things the unlettered like poetry to be very poetical, and they are apt to resent violently any pretension to familiarity in the rendering of those whom they have known in English—only caparisoned in gorgeous tatters of Authorised Bible diction, patched with Kipling in his Sunday manner. I remember protests against allowing Tragedy persons even to say 'You' for *Thou* and *Thee*: yet why should Shakespeare's practice come amiss in a rendering of Sophocles? The objector's answer, if he dared or cared to express it, would be that he couldn't bear his classics to be familiarized. He wishes them to appear remote and of another world. Perhaps this is his way of feeling what Dr. Bridges asserts (see below, p. 16). Illusion is, of course, essential in Art; but ought our illusion to be quite different from theirs who enjoyed the original? This seems to be untrue and therefore bad art. I want to discover and reconstruct an environment, not a master-

piece *in vacuo*; because contemporaries must have known it better than we can do without their assistance. Difficult it is; but not so hopelessly difficult after all, if we set about it in the right way. Style is not all airy and immeasurable, but a thing patient of comparative estimate. Here are two simple rules. Do you want to determine the pitch of, say, Sophocles? Take a standpoint in the central classical period when the Greek language is at its maturity of expressiveness, and judge him by the prose writers. Does he use a common vocabulary with them? If so, his pitch is evidently more familiar than that of Aeschylus, whom Aristophanes testifies to have been, to the taste of the next generation, grandiloquent to the verge of bombast.

The second test is more searching and demands perhaps more scholarship to apply it. It depends on a great principle in the ancient teaching of style—Rhetoric, as they called it: a most proper subject for teachers of English nowadays to teach. The ancient Professors of Literature saw that a language has for its backbone a vocabulary of pure idiom, *κῦρια propria*, in which we regularly express ourselves—the language of educated and businesslike people whose code is common sense—in the old full meaning of that glorious term. Dithyrambists, stockbrokers, sporting journalists, and other votaries of Dionysus, do not think or speak in *propria*, but in a wild and fanciful jargon of metaphors, allusions, &c. They write for the few, *φωρᾶντα συνετοῖσιν*. The moment you depart from *propria*, you are using Figured Language. Your nouns wear masks and dress up, your sentences attitudinize.<sup>1</sup> Take Horace and Virgil and assay them by this test: their more or less of Figured or of Real, in vocabulary and syntax—which the old commentators especially can help us to determine—will give you a base for calculating their pitch of language. Now English, since Wordsworth, affords us similar scales. If you make highfalutin English of familiar Latin, you falsify; just as, if you suggest bathos, you fail. But for ninety-nine critics who will exclaim at the latter fault, hardly one will be aware of the former. As an instance we need go no further afield than Virgil's *Eclogues* once more. Since the Germans started belittling Virgil, as they belittled all Latin, in order to glorify Greek—of which they fondly suppose themselves to be the literary heirs in Europe<sup>2</sup>; our English scholars, with the degrading sequacity which was the prescribed attitude of Oxford towards German scholarship until the day before

<sup>1</sup> Rutherford, *A Chapter in the History of Annotation*.

<sup>2</sup> Plessis, in his Preface to *Histoire de la Poésie latine*, has some good remarks on this matter.



yesterday, also duly set to and glorified Theocritus at the expense of Virgil. It was an easy task to call Virgil's adaptation mere imitation: judged by the same criteria you might find *Lycidas* to be a very unoriginal piece of work. In the process, having no loving curiosity to spend on Virgil, and obeying almost unconsciously the Victorian prepossession that classical writers are always very very serious—unless when they announce *This is a joke*—we lost all perception for the playfulness, the finesse, the irony, the humours of characterization, which Horace saw in his friend. Indeed, you must go back to Dryden to get any representation of these qualities. For Dryden—of whom the present Laureate disapproves, and whom Macaulay thought horrid—has this great merit, a natural appreciation of the pitch of style in Virgil; which atones for some limitations in his scholarship and in his metrical resource.

*Dic mihi, Damoeta, cuium pecus? An Meliboei?*

What is the tone of *dic mihi*? Polite or peremptory? How did *cuium* for *cuius* strike a contemporary ear?

What a producer does when he coaches an actor is what a teacher ought to do for a pupil in these matters; but the pupil often grows up into a translator without ever asking such questions or beginning to suspect the existence of problems which are prerequisites to his success.

## V

In all this I have been supposing that the translator's duty is to interpret, not to betray; and that the original has its rights, and is not to be treated merely as the prey of the translator. But if any one shall object, 'So long as the translator gives me a good poem or a good prose book in English, what do I care? Has he betrayed his author? Let him see to that': the objector must be answered with a distinction. As long as you take no liberties with an ancient author's name, you are perfectly free to cut and carve, or swallow him whole, if he suits your palate, and your digestion can make food of him. That delightful sentence may be obsolete as a statement in Natural History, but it still does pleasant service as a canon of literary ethics in the matter of borrowing and translating.

*Serpens nisi serpentem comederit non fit draco.*

Certainly the dragons of ancient poetry victualled themselves freely and profitably on their brother serpents. So do the moderns, and with the assurance that not many modern critics will be able to trace their depredations. Perhaps the only perfect translations are the scraps which poets bring in without acknowledgement: things got in a lusty stealth.

*The world's great age begins anew, the golden years return.*

Nothing so perfect was ever seen in a professed translation; yet Shelley does not trouble to name Virgil. It is translation *in excelsis*, transmutation you may call it, which only comes about in a rare poetical heat, such as seldom kindles even in a great poet's brain when he is sitting down *ex professo* to translate. You could collect dozens of instances where a single phrase or line of Greek or Latin has been done into English with utterly satisfying equivalence by Milton or Tennyson, or even Landor. No acknowledgement is necessary. This is Spartan thieving. If you can steal and not be found out, the conveyed booties are yours with good enough title. 'It is about as easy to steal a line from Homer', said Virgil, 'as to rob Heracles of his club.'

But when we come to borrowing an ancient's name as well as his wares, we must be cautious. There seems to me to be a real question of *loyauté*, of intellectual honesty, involved. So much that looks innocent in these days is at bottom *tendencieux* (what's the English for *tendencieux*, by the way? Is *tendencious* authorized yet?) that we must beware lest a translation of a man's work be not really a questionable procuring, not to say a forging, of his signature to some modern manifesto. Gilbert Murray's *Euripides* has many great merits which have gained it deserved success; but I cannot feel it to be a disinterested work of beauty. And if Euripides is to be enlisted in various modern polemics, then I must call a rendering which contains so much that belongs to the translator's liberal fancy a pious fraud. It may be a foolish scruple, but my feeling is that if you say 'after' Euripides, you are free: you have acknowledged a source of inspiration or suggestion. You are sailing under your own colours. But if you say the word *Translation*, you adopt a borrowed authority. This is no censure on the literary quality of the work: *that* lies open to criticism if we allow one of the Laureate's doctrines for sound, which at any rate is interesting to discuss next. 'It is in my opinion a mistake to think that the best translations of Greek verse are those which make it seem like well-written conventional English verse. If an English reader who is unable to read Greek is to get a glimpse of what Homer is like, he must read something which does not remind him of Milton, or Pope, or Tennyson, or Swinburne.' The last word may be taken for a hit at Murray.

But this doctrine brings us suddenly face to face with a chasm: a question in which you must plump absolutely for one side or the other. In the first place a distinction is necessary: it may be a fault



in Murray's *Euripides* that it reminds us of Swinburne and Morris, but is it therefore a fault in Pope's *Homer* that it reminds us of Pope? Is it not rather a dilettantist refinement this of requiring that, because an author lived long ago, and in other conditions, and wrote a language long since dead, our living language must put on weird airs and outlandish fashions to represent it? To take proper pleasure is the function of taste; but surely this is to be most nicely particular in the idiosyncrasy of the proper pleasure to be derived. This puts us quite at variance with Egger's canon (quoted above); for in Bridges' view it is a sin if Homer reminds us of the Song of Roland. But if we accept the theory of a natural fitness at a given epoch, this is implied. What is the solution? Once more the central theory of Classicism provides one. Is Homer weird and outlandish? No. That which in Homer or any other ancient master is qualified to live *ubique et semper*, i. e. of strictly classic quality, can be dressed in the native resources of any civilized language, and need not go ostentatiously badged and uniformed as an alien in our midst. Homer, remote as he is, is immeasurably nearer to us in mind and manners than the *Arabian Nights*. And again, if there is a natural personal sympathy between Tibullus and André Chenier, why is it vicious for a French rendering of Tibullus to remind the reader of his modern analogue? But Bridges' question is nothing like exhausted yet: it is the fundamental question for translators. For in its largest terms you may put it in this way: is the ancient to come in on his own terms or ours? His access by the gate, or by a breach in the wall? For a test case consider Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. You know Browning's theory as stated in the preface to his translation:

'If, because of the immense fame of the following Tragedy, I wished to acquaint myself with it, and could only do so by the help of a translator, I should require him to be literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language. The use of certain allowable constructions which, happening to be out of daily favour, are all the more appropriate to archaic workmanship, is no violence: but I would be tolerant for once—in the case of so immensely famous an original—of even a clumsy attempt to furnish me with the very turn of each phrase in as Greek a fashion as English will bear: while, with respect to amplifications and embellishments,—anything rather than, with the good farmer, experience that most signal of mortifications, "to gape for Aeschylus and get Theognis".'

Now, on the other part, hear Fitzgerald in his Preface to *Agamemnon*:

'I suppose that a literal version of this play, if possible, would scarcely be intelligible. Even were the dialogue always clear, the lyric Choruses, which make up so large a part, are so dark and abrupt

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Works*, vol. vi.

in themselves, and therefore so much the more mangled and tormented by copyist and commentator, that the most conscientious translator must not only jump at a meaning, but must bridge over a chasm, especially if he determine to complete the antiphony of Strophe and Antistrophe in English verse.

‘Thus encumbered with forms which sometimes, I think, hang heavy on Aeschylus himself: struggling with indistinct meanings, obscure allusions, and even with *puns* which some have tried to reproduce in English; this grand play, which to the scholar and poet, lives, breathes and moves in the dead language, has hitherto seemed to me to drag and strifle under conscientious translation into the living; that is to say, to have lost that which I think the drama can least afford to lose all the world over. And so it was that, hopeless of succeeding where as good versifiers, and better scholars, seemed to me to have failed, I came first to break the bounds of Greek Tragedy; then to swerve from the Master’s footsteps; and so, one licence drawing on another to make all of a piece, arrived at the present anomalous conclusion. If it has succeeded in shaping itself into a distinct, consistent and animated Whole, through which the reader can follow without halting, and not without accelerating interest from beginning to end, he will perhaps excuse my acknowledged transgressions, and will not disdain the Jade that has carried him so far so well till he find himself mounted on a Thoroughbred whose thunderclothed neck and long-resounding pace shall better keep up with the Original.

‘For to recreate the Tragedy, body and soul, into English, and make the Poet free of the language which reigns over that half of the world never dreamt of in his philosophy, must be reserved—especially the Lyric part—for some poet, worthy of that name, and of congenial Genius with the Greek. Would that every one such would devote himself to one such work!—whether by Translation, Paraphrase, or Metaphrase, to use Dryden’s definition, whose Alexander’s Feast, and some fragments of whose plays, indicate that he, perhaps, might have rendered such a service to Aeschylus and to us, or to go further back in our own drama, one thinks what Marlowe might have done.’

‘Well, I have not turned over Johnson’s Dictionary for the last month, having got hold of Aeschylus. I think I want to turn his Trilogies into what shall be readable English verse; a thing I have always thought of, but was frightened at the Chorus. So I am now; I can’t think them so fine as People talk of; they are terribly maimed; and all such Lyrics require a better Poet than I am to set forth in English. But the better Poets won’t do it; and I cannot find one readable translation. I shall (if I make one) make a very free one; not for Scholars, but for those who are ignorant of Greek, and who (so far as I have seen) have never been induced to learn it by any Translations yet made of these Plays. I think I shall become a bore, of the Bowring order, by all this Translation; but it amuses me without any labour, and I really think I have the faculty of making some things readable which others have hitherto left unreadable.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Idem, *Letters, Coll. Works*, vol. ii, p. 72, to Cowell, 1857.



‘I suppose very few People have ever taken such pains with Translation as I have, though certainly not to be literal. But at all Cost, a Thing must *live*, with a transfusion of one’s own worse life if one can’t retain the Original’s better. Better a live sparrow than a stuffed eagle.’<sup>1</sup>

That is the challenge and this is the replique. The issue is quite squarely drawn for decision. What is your verdict?

Let us first remark that Browning’s position is distinctively modern; such a claim would be inconceivable earlier than the nineteenth century. Call it, if you like, one of many significant symptoms of the anarchy of thought and art which marked that century. But at least you will admit that so long as recognized standards of form were there to correct eccentricity and assimilate barbarisms (in the Greek sense—shall we say *Exterisms*?), a clear difference was drawn between a translation which claims literary rank and a translation which is only useful or agreeable to those who are learning the original language. For instance, here are words taken from George Colman the younger’s Preface to his rendering of Terence (1766):

‘Those who have (i. e. since Echard) since employed themselves on this author, seem to have confined their labours to the humble endeavour of assisting learners of Latin in the construction of the original text.’

Cribs, in fact, to use our brutal modern term. Of cribs and the queer jargon which crawled into being when cribs began to set up literary pretensions, the *criblingo*, which is current only in the limbo where books attempted to be carried from one language into another and dropped half-way have a pale unhonoured existence, no treatment could be attempted in less space than a whole lecture; I must therefore deny myself any excursion into this interesting field.

You will recognize something that they all take for granted—Colman and Fitzgerald and Browning,—which can be resolved into this: a necessary and invincible residual inequality between the original and the translation, and a consequent question—which is to be master? Is it an absolute position to say, ‘*Good English is good English, and nothing shall enter here which cannot or will not assume national colours*’? Or is Aeschylus allowed an indefeasible right to have the English language cut into rags and patched together to fit him? To fit him with what? A coat of motley! For fear lest the cut of his clothes be too English. Authority, which some call Tyranny, and Freedom, which some say is Anarchy, have to fight

<sup>1</sup> Idem, *ib.* p. 100, 1859.

it out, here as elsewhere. Of course there are great Victorian voices, Carlyle with his German soul and Browning with his German-Jewish intellect, instinctively in rebellion against the sacred and vital institution of national language. But although (as we have seen) one of the proper functions of translation, and just that which makes it a natural diet for languages in their adolescence, is to expand the capacities, force a growth even of new organs in the translators, to satisfy the needs and perform the feats to which the ancients challenge it; does it follow that the needs for expansion and adaptation which were present in the language 500 years ago, still exist unsatisfied? Has English not yet realized what it means to be, or found its true genius? For that is the renunciation implied in Browning's claim and practice. Or is it merely a fickleness of fashion and a restlessness of personal ambition in men who are in 'the sulks' or 'on the make', which indulges these eccentricities?

We must dig rather deeper within the site indicated by Brunetière. Try here. What do we mean when we say (one often hears it) that the Classics need retranslating for the taste of a new age? Chapman, Hobbes, Pope, none of them but thinks scorn of his predecessors; and then the nineteenth century disowns them all, allowing a preference though for the earliest. No one reads Chapman; but he is good enough to beat Pope with. He owes most of his remembrance to the chance word that Keats threw to him.

If we admit that the language had hardly reached its classical maturity when any of Pope's predecessors made their essays (which, of course, does not mean that Pope's was the period or the hand best qualified to English Homer); and if, furthermore, we admit that the knowledge of Greek (a prerequisite, of course) was greatly improved in the nineteenth century, still there remains, after taking these two abatements, an important cause to be drawn out. Some French statesman (M. Hanotaux, I think) observed that it is nonsense to talk of the decadence or destruction of France, because the Western nations, being composite, have internal resources of repair. Alternate strains in the breed revive and recover; when the Frank wears out, the Gaul reappears; when the Norman shows senescence, the Iberian element provides a new force of blood, &c.<sup>1</sup> And it is all France: provided the institutions are sound, it is all France, successive and alternate phases of an identical thing. Leaving the German to his fatuous brag of being pure-blooded and uncrossed—a boast which the crabtree has made to the apple, and the sloe tree to the plum, for

<sup>1</sup> Since this was written I find in Brunetière's *Hist. de la Litt. franç.*, vol. iv, pp. 169-71, some valuable indications on this subject.



thousands of years—what is true of France is fully as true of us. The fact is a commonplace, but the consequences are strangely neglected. There are great chapters unwritten on the ethnological bases of great historic revolutions. What strain wore out, what new strain came up and took charge in our revolutions—that of the sixteenth century and that which we are still painfully traversing? And you can never separate history from literature. The disfavour into which our Augustans fell means a change of ear in the reader. Every racial constituent has its unconscious sympathies and aptitudes in rhythm and vocabulary. If you hate the very idea of *Speaking Verse* and deny the title of poetry to anything but *Singing Verse*, the reason lies deeper than your schooling or your studies. If you think *begin* is a beautiful word and *commence* an abomination, even in the pure idioms ‘*commence tradesman*’, ‘*commence firing*’, you declare yourself of a racial faction. (You are so much the poorer for it. The great mother-tongue is a mother to all her children; good English ought to employ these doublets as an organist employs the different registers of his instrument. This by the way.)

Now in the light of this fact we can see how the power and office of translation will be prolonged or recalled at intervals. Since now one, now another, element of a composite language is in youth, the standardizing as well as developing discipline of translation has far from exhausted its opportunity. (May I even suggest that part of the activity of English in development is a perpetual process of *internal* translation—translation from one fund of the language to another?) The nineteenth century craved for Homer dressed in a pastiche of Jacobean Bible English; and Butcher and Lang furnished the British schoolboy with his authorized version. Thus was he expected—nay, required under penalty to translate. The Laureate reckons it a fault if Homer in English reminds us of Pope; thirty years ago it was thought anything but a fault if Homer reminded a boy of the head master declaiming at the lectern. In the last resort, we come to a phase of religious history. And to that subject my paper makes no pretence of contributing. Homer was swept into the wake of a craze. As Opheltes in the Theban legend was killed, sleeping, by an unconscious flick of the passing Dragon’s tail, so Homer must fall in with the anti-Augustan reaction. A generation had arisen which could not bear *domes* and *dames*, but whose ears were tickled by a vocabulary of Tudor words arranged in a syntax which might be of the nineteenth century, or of no century whatever. If one may say that translation is a Foreign Legion in which great writers of other languages are enrolled; then, pursuing the same metaphor, one must add that

in the Victorian Age it was no longer a question of enlisting Homer in the English language—that had been done; but of drawing him into a faction. Not Homer in English, but Homer in a different English. A new party wished to say, ‘We have our Homer’.

And now to return finally to the case of Browning and Fitzgerald, which we have kept at avizandum. The verdict I suggest to you is that the rights of English are supreme. A translation should be read for pleasure, not merely for curiosity; and read as literature. Not scholars (least of all self-taught scholars), but men of letters are the authorities of this custom-house. What claims to pass into English by the gate of translation must be chalked with their approval. But in affairs of art practice can always override principle.

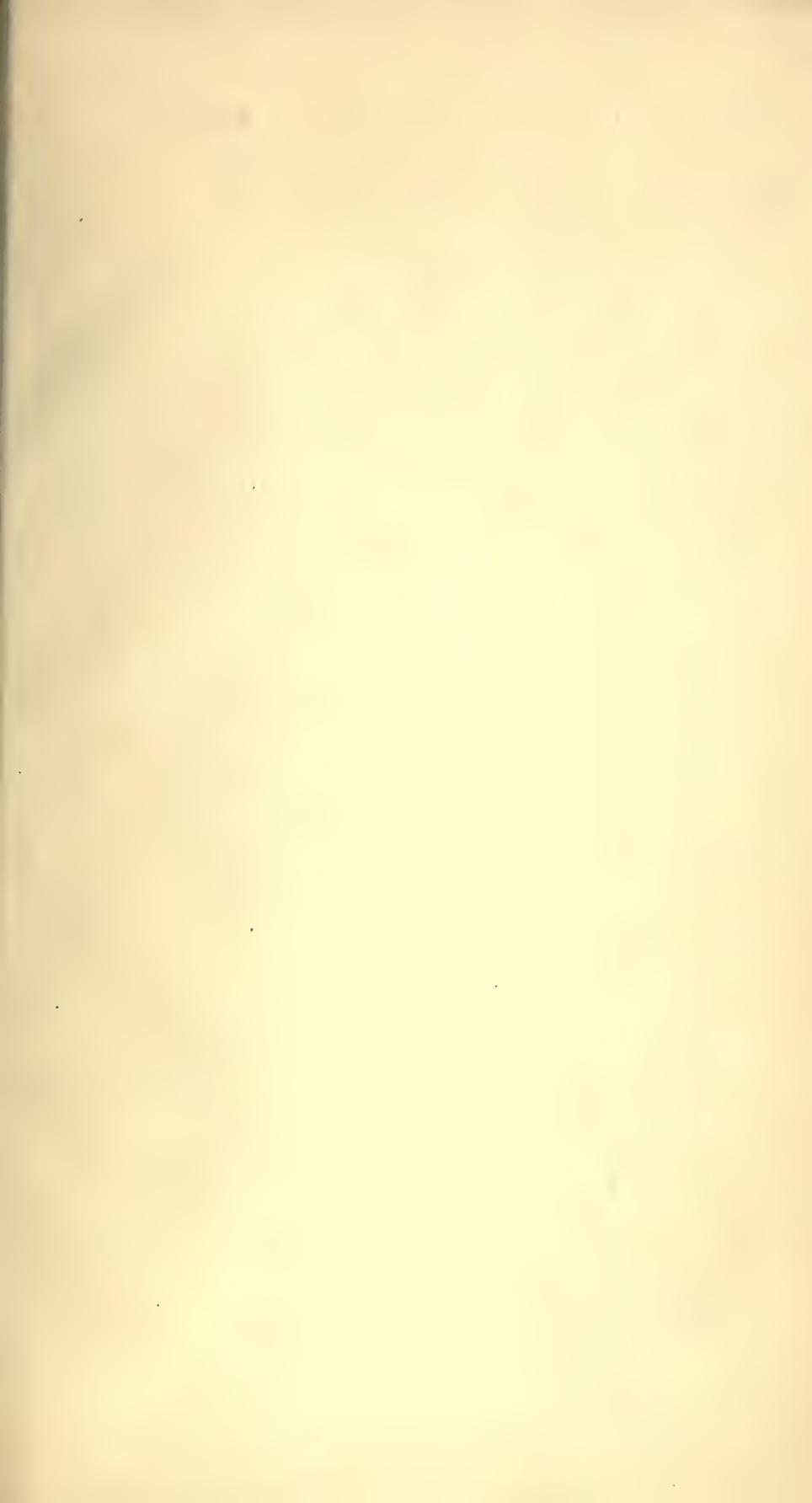
*Treason can ne’er succeed, and what’s the reason?  
When it succeeds we do not call it treason.*

All the rules serve Beauty; show you can serve her by breaking them, and all their sanctions shall be waived for you. And in practice, if you start two good craftsmen, one from the principle that *English is paramount: nothing shall pass but what is perfectly sterling English*, and another from the other extreme, *the Greek’s the thing: not a hair of its head shall be sacrificed*—irreconcilably far distant as their points of departure may appear to be, yet the excellence, the adroitness of their craftsmanship will be the measure of their approach to each other. ‘In as Greek a fashion as English can bear’ says Browning; and old Fitz replies (in effect) ‘as English as Aeschylus can be made.’ Browning is out to try the patience, Fitz the powers, of English. But an artist is often a better man than his principles. And after a masterpiece, critics must often revise their legislation; though unless their measures have been very ill conceived, it ought never to reduce them to anarchy.

For forms of Government let fools contest;  
Whate’er is best administered is best.

Is that the last word on the question? No, that is the abrogation of criticism. Whatever can be well administered is so far good. But you can never define what you mean by ‘good’ administration, or success of a literary experiment, without recourse to classicist standards—*quod ubique quod semper*—durability and power to command consent. Browning’s claim, doubtful now, is ever less likely to be allowed in the future; Fitzgerald’s is unquestionable now. Therefore—judgement for Fitzgerald.









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